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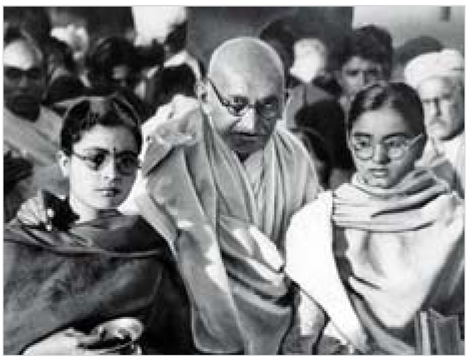
Mahatma & Manuben: Newly discovered diaries of Gandhi's personal attendant reveal how his experiments with celibacy changed her life

UDAY MAHURKAR | June 7, 2013 | 17:02



Mahatma Gandhi with Manuben (Right) and Abha

She is one of the most recognised faces in Indian history, always by Mahatma Gandhi's side as his "walking stick" in his last two years. Yet, she remains a mystery. Just 17 when she rejoined the Mahatma as one of his personal assistants in 1946, she was the great man's constant companion till his assassination. Yet, Mridula Gandhi, or Manuben as she is widely known, died a lonely spinster at the age of 40 in Delhi.



Mahatma Gandhi with Manuben (Right) and Abha

Manuben was portrayed by Supriya Pathak in Richard Attenborough's Gandhi (1982). More than four decades after her death, India Today has got access to 10 of her diaries, written in Gujarati and running into 2,000 pages. Studied in detail by Gujarati academic Rizwan Kadri, the diaries, which begin from April 11, 1943, reveal the psychological impact of Gandhi's experiment with his sexuality on Manuben. They also throw light on the jealousy and anger rife at the heart of Gandhi's entourage, many of them young women. The diaries begin when Manuben, a grandniece of Gandhi, came to Aga Khan Palace in Pune to look after Gandhi's wife Kasturba during the couple's internment starting from 1942 following the Quit India movement. Manuben nursed Kasturba in her final months of illness. The diary entries end 22 days after January 30, 1948, the day Nathuram Godse pushed aside Manuben to fire three shots at Gandhi from a 9mm Beretta.

The diaries, in which Gandhi often signed on the margins, reveal a girl devoted to him. In an entry on December 28, 1946, at Srirampur, Bihar, nine days after joining the then 77-year-old Gandhi who was on a walk through of troubled villages after massacres in Noakhali in then East Bengal, she writes: "Bapu is a mother to me. He is initiating me to a higher human plane through the Brahmacharya experiments, part of his Mahayagna of character-building. Any loose talk about the experiment is most condemnable." Pyarelal, Gandhi's secretary, endorsed this view in Mahatma Gandhi: The Last Phase, "He did for her everything that a mother usually does for her daughter. He supervised her education, her food, dress, rest, and sleep. For closer supervision and guidance, he made her sleep in the same bed with him. Now a girl, if her mind is innocent, never feels embarrassment in sleeping with her mother." She, in turn, was his primary personal attendant-massaging and bathing him as well as cooking for him.

The diaries go into the details of the lives of Gandhi's women associates like Dr Sushila Nayar, his personal physician and Pyarelal's sister, and who later became Union health minister, as well as his Rajput-Muslim follower Bibi Amtussalam. They also indicate the intense jealousy over who would be part of the Mahatma's experiments with celibacy. Manuben's diary entry dated February 24, 1947, at Haimchar, Bihar, states: "Today Bapu wrote a strong letter to Amtussalamben saying that the element of regret that his celibacy experiment didn't start with her was apparent in her letter to him."

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>
> - Manuben

The diaries, which found their way to the National Archives in Delhi in 2010, also show Pyarelal, despite being 47 years old, making repeated overtures to Manuben with Sushila Nayar pushing the case. Manuben finally makes a telling entry on February 2, 1947, at Dashdharia, Bihar: "I see Pyarelalji as my elder brother and nothing else. The day I decide to marry my guru, my elder brother or my grandfather, I shall marry him. Don't force me on this any further."

Manuben's jottings also give an insight into the growing disquiet among Gandhi's followers over his celibacy tests. In a diary entry of January 31, 1947, when she was at Navgram, Bihar, Manuben refers to a letter to Gandhi from his close follower Kishorelal Mashruwala where he calls her "Maya" (an illusion or a temptress) and asks the Mahatma to free himself off her clutches. To this, Gandhi replies: "You do whatever you want but I am firm in my belief regarding this experiment." Even as Manuben and Gandhi walked through Noakhali in Bengal, two of his entourage- R.P. Parasuram, who had acted as his secretary, and Nirmal Kumar Bose, also his secretary and later director of Anthropological Society of India-left in anger over Gandhi's behaviour. Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, in a letter to Gandhi on January 25, 1947, currently among the Patel papers housed in the National Archives, asked him to suspend the experiment which Patel called a "terrible blunder" on Gandhi's part that pained his followers "beyond measure".

The deep imprint the Mahatma left on Manuben's psyche is best reflected in a letter to Jawaharlal Nehru from Morarji Desai on August 19, 1955, soon after he called on Manuben in August at the Bombay Hospital where she had been admitted for an "unknown" ailment. Desai writes: "Manu's problem is more psychological than physiological. She appears to have despaired for life and developed allergy to all kinds of medicines."

Manuben was one of two persons by the Mahatma's side when he was shot by Nathuram Godse at 5.17 p.m. on January 30, 1948, at Birla House in Delhi, the other being Abhaben Gandhi, wife of his nephew Kanu Gandhi. Manuben writes the next day: "While the flames on the funeral pyre were consuming Bapu's body, I

felt like sitting till well after the funeral was over. Sardar Patel comforted me and took me to his home. It was just unimaginable for me. Bapu was there two days ago, yesterday at least his body was there and today I am all alone. I am totally distraught." The next and last entry in the diary is on February 21, 1948, when she left for Mahuva near Bhavnagar from Delhi by train. It says: "Today I left Delhi." In Last Glimpses of Bapu, one of five books Manuben wrote after Gandhi's death, she notes: "Kaka (Gandhi's youngest son Devdas) warned me not to disclose the contents of my diary to anyone and at the same time forbade me to divulge the contents of the important lettersâ€¦ He said, 'You are very young but you possess a lot of valuable literature. And you are also unsophisticated.'"

Even in her 68-page memoir, Bapu: My Mother, Manuben never revealed her feelings about Gandhi's experiments with his sexuality in which she was a part. In one of the 15 chapters, she writes that soon after the death of Kasturba, which happened within 10 months of her moving to Pune, she received a very moving note from Bapu as he was in maunvrat (vow of silence) and could communicate only by writing. Gandhi advised her in that note to go to Rajkot and resume her studies. "From that day Bapu became my mother," Manuben writes in the chapter. The teenaged Manuben, who had studied till Class V in Karachi where her father, Gandhi's nephew Jaisukhlal, worked in the Scindia Steam Navigation Company, also needed a mother-like anchor since she had just lost her mother when she came to Pune.

Manuben's final years were spent by herself. She lived in Mahuva near Bhavnagar in Gujarat for almost 21 years after Gandhi's assassination. She ran a children's school besides floating Bhagini Samaj, which espoused women's issues. Among those who were associated with Manuben during this last phase of her life is Bhanuben Lahiri, from a family of freedom fighters. She was one of the 22 women members of the Samaj. Lahiri recalls the profound impact Gandhi left on his grandniece. Once, she says, when Manuben took a chunari (a scarf-like piece of cloth) from her for the marriage of one of her poor followers, she said: "I see myself as Mirabai (the great medieval saint who worshipped Lord Krishna) who lived only for her Shyamlo (Krishna)."

Commenting on the diaries, psychoanalyst and scholar Sudhir Kakar writes: "So focused was the Mahatma on his own feelings during these experiments that I believe he may have 'chosen' to overlook their consequences for the women involved. Except for the flaring up of violent jealousy between the various women, we do not know the psychological effects, if any, that these experiments left on each of the women."

Now, thanks to the recovery of Manuben's diaries, we can assess the psychological impact the Mahatma had on his intimate companion.

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